

Family Trapping Matters

By Ron Wilson

It's mid-September, about a month until Bob and Alice Gangl set dozens of traps for furbearers that wander, swim and negotiate the underbrush near their Morton County farm. A coyote crosses the road, snakes under a fence, sneaking peeks over its shoulder as it goes. If it stayed its course, it could make the couple's farmyard about a mile south in no time.



Bob and Alice Gangl are rare in that they are one of few husband-and-wife trapping teams in North Dakota.

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It seemed appropriate to see the coyote – like finding an old penny before interviewing a coin collector – before sitting down and talking trapping with Bob and Alice, self-described as one of the few husband-and-wife trapping duos in North Dakota.

On this September morning the coyote would likely have gone unnoticed if it had chosen to silently scoot through the farmyard. The couple was busy moving cows from one place to another for reasons lost on most city folks. Like trapping, it's one of the many things the married couple of 46 years does together – four hands better than two, two heads better than one.

With the corral gate shut behind them, Bob and Alice walk down a dirt drive both could negotiate with their eyes closed. Bob was born and raised on this place south of St. Anthony 69 years ago.

In a handful of the buildings that line the drive, you'll find the makings of their trapping operation – boards for drying furs, scented lures to attract furbearers, a five-gallon bucket that acts as a trapping carryall, cable snares hanging from nails, and so on. Outside there are traps, traps and more traps. To the uninitiated, it appears they have more than a couple could find time to set. Bob and Alice are quick to point out, however, that there are other trappers with larger collections, but you'd have to think the list is pretty short.

Lifelong trapper Bob Gangl with the results of a recent trapping season.

Bob is a lifelong trapper, but his interest really took off in the mid-1980s. Alice is no greenhorn either, but her start didn't come until about 1999. "I finally talked her into making a set and a couple days later she had a coyote," Bob said. "She's been hooked on it since."

Drive around the Gangl farm and you can see further evidence of Alice's trapping interest. Wood stakes pushed into dirt and flagged with colored ribbons mark her gopher sets. She's trying to thin the population of these enthusiastic diggers as their dirt mounds complicate farming chores by dulling swather blades and the like.

"One year when I was trapping gophers I was feeding a family of coyotes ... they were pulling my traps and eating my gophers," she said. "Badgers like to do that, too, but they can sometimes get naughty and tear the ribbons from my poles."

Like bird hunters, waterfowl enthusiasts or anglers, the Gangls have their favorite prey. "We trap everything that is available, but the one I like to fool the best is the beaver," Bob said.

For Alice, it goes back to the animal that got her hooked. "Coyotes are such a challenge to trap and I'm still learning," she said. "I'm always wondering what I'm doing wrong."

Alice has been hearing coyotes calling at night, so she knows they're about. She likes it this way, but not strictly from a trapping standpoint. "I like having coyotes around," she said. "I don't like to trap them all."

The Gangls trap many of the same areas from year to year, and catching all the furbearers is not a worry. "Furbearers are very prolific and as long as they have habitat and food, they reproduce in great numbers," Bob said.

Bob is a firm believer in taking what he calls "extra animals" to create a healthy balance, as you can't stockpile wildlife of any kind. "This was never more evident than in my younger years when the skunk population would build year after year because no one would trap them," he said. "Then the population would crash and we'd find dead skunks everywhere."

Research has also shown that if animals are lost from the landscape for whatever reason, other animals move in to fill the void.

Trapping is one of those pursuits that can crawl inside you and take hold. It's you against an animal that seemingly has every advantage – keen senses and an intimate knowledge of the terrain, which would seemingly alert it to anything peculiar. "Trapping is something that gets to you because you're trying to get this animal to step in one place, and it has the entire country to walk around in," Bob said. "Trapping, like anything else, is an ongoing learning experience. You'll run into an animal that knows the game and you have to start all over."

If you don't count the gopher traps that have been out all summer, it's in October when Bob and Alice start running their trap line, checking six to seven dozen traps every day. Snares are then added to the mix sometime in November when the season opens and things are good and frozen.

Most of the traps are set close to home, or "around the neighborhood," as Alice puts it. "We try to stay within reason because we have livestock to take care of during the day," she said. "We have all we can handle."

Surprisingly, it takes only about an hour or two to check their entire line. They use an ATV to scoot from set to set, and are able to check some traps from a distance with binoculars. And to miss checking even one is not tolerated. "We're getting to the point where we have to take notes as to where the traps are ... it's an age thing," Alice joked.

And all their snares are marked with ribbon tied to nearby vegetation. "I want to be sure that when we leave an area, we leave with everything," Bob said.



For the last decade, Bob in particular has been preaching the proper ethics – as well as how to make a proper set to catch a furbearer and other trapping tips – to budding trappers around the state. “We’ve gone to 4-H and youth conservation camps for about 10 years doing demonstrations and explaining the need for trapping as a furbearer management tool,” he said. “Trapping is growing, but not by leaps and bounds. We’re seeing some interest with the kids we’re talking to. Trapping is something very few of them have experienced, and we’re trying to expose them to something we’ve enjoyed for a long time.”

As a tenderfoot, you come away from visiting with Bob and Alice with a grand appreciation for the amount of work involved in trapping. Simply readying traps for the season, then setting and checking them over and over sounds arduous enough. But then you go and harvest something, as the Gangls often do, and more work follows.

The credo in the Gangl trapping camp is that nothing goes to waste. If Bob traps a beaver, for instance, the fur gets sold, meat gets saved as dog food, and the animal’s glands get sold or made into trapping lure. “There’s a market or a use for about everything,” Bob said. Including the unmistakable skunk essence the animal sprays in defense of predators.

“There are only a small handful of people who trap skunks for their essence,” Bob said. “Obviously, it’s not something you want to get on you. If it’s just fumes, they will leave you in a couple hours. But if you get a drop or more on you, you’ll notice it for a long time.”

Skunk essence is sold and used to make trapping lure.

“Whether it’s used pure or mixed with something, it’s strong and carries for a distance and other animals come to investigate,” Bob said. “Fox and badger love skunks and a coyote will eat one if it gets hungry enough.”

Maybe two years ago was the last time a trapped skunk really nailed Bob, from about his belly on down. A week later, keys carried in a front pocket still stunk, reminding him

of the incident. “Even the dogs didn’t want to ride in the truck with him,” Alice said.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Alice Gangl is thrilled with her luck. She trapped this skunk and a red fox in the same spot on different days.

Alice Gangl inspects some of the many traps employed on their trap line.



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